

Church of the Crossroads
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 13, 2008
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IN PRAISE OF IDLENESS

Acts 2:42–47
Psalm 23
John 10:1–10

Our celebration of Easter continues today on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, which is also known each year as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” The readings are wonderful and re-assuring. First, we hear about the way in which the Early Christian Community organized itself around communitarian values. Just imagine a community in which everyone sells his or her possessions, puts the proceeds into a common pot, and then looks after the needs of all, according to his or her need. What an antidote to the anxiety that economic striving always seems to generate!

There is also a re-assuring, comforting feeling that one gets when hearing about the Good Shepherd from the Gospel of John. In this passage, the sheep are both protected and nourished at the hands of a gracious shepherd who is portrayed as the open gate through which the sheep come and go, at night into the safety of the fold, and in the day to abundant pastures where there is food to eat. It is a pastoral scene that urban dwellers, caught up into the frantic pace of city life, must sometimes envy.

That pastoral scene is carried into the words of the beloved 23rd Psalm, and it is from this psalm that I have chosen my text for today:

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. (Ps 23:1–2)

Every time I tell someone that I am going to retire later this year, the question inevitably comes: “Well, what are you going to **do?**” When in response I confess that I do not know what I am going to do and that perhaps for a while I will **do nothing**, I either receive a smiling approval from those who know or who would like to know the joy of idleness, or a frown from

those who have experienced nothing much except the toil of work and who cannot imagine anything beyond it.

Then, just as I was feeling comfortable with this idea of doing nothing, I happened to read a commentary last Monday written by Andrew Yarrow on the editorial page of the *Honolulu Advertiser*, which was entitled “Working Longer Will Alleviate National Debt.” Mr. Yarrow states:

It’s not that I’m all work and no play. But there’s something—make that lots of things wrong, in general, with retiring at 55, 62, or even 65. I would go so far as to call it profoundly selfish and unpatriotic.

Dropping out of the work force while still in one’s prime means ending one’s contribution to America’s strength, mortgaging our children’s and grandchildren’s future and leeching trillions of taxpayer dollars from the economy.¹

After all, says Mr. Yarrow, how are we going to pay off the national debt and keep America’s economy going unless we work? Well, I guess Mr. Yarrow has put me in my place. So much for doing nothing.

A contrasting view is offered by Mark Slouka, who wrote an article “Quitting the Paint Factory” for the November 2004 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*. The title of the article refers to the time Sherwood Anderson was the manager of a paint factory. One day he just walked away from his work and became the well-known writer of short stories we have come to know him to be. Slouka develops his article, which praises idleness, by referring to “the God of Work,” and “the Church of work,” and the anxiety-ridden American commitment to busyness, work, the virtue of needing little sleep, and the passion for affluence that arises from much work.

In his article, Slouka turns to the subject of leisure, and says that the “Church of Work,” is all for leisure, as long as it is well organized and trendy. He writes,

Open almost any magazine in America today and there they are: The ubiquitous tanned-and-toned twenty-somethings driving the \$70,000 fruits of their labor; the moneyed-looking men and

¹ Andrew I. Yarrow, “Working Longer Will Alleviate National Debt,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, April 7, 2008

women in their healthy sixties (to give the young something to aspire to) tossing Frisbees to Irish setters or tying on flies in midstream or watching sunsets from the Adirondack chairs.²

In the “Church of Work,” this is leisure that is approved. It is contrasted with the idleness that is harshly disapproved of in our society . . . time to ponder, time to consider options, time to reflect, time to develop the internal life (as we are doing in the Courage to Teach seminars). Slouka argues that such idleness is an essential requirement in a democratic society so that we can indeed exercise our free political reflection. Such idleness is contrasted to the life pattern of George W. Bush, who epitomizes “busy-ness” . . . “doing, not thinking.” Our image of the president is that of one riding on a horse or clearing brush, but also one who never pauses to reflect, for to reflect, he might begin to move into the world of nuance, and as he has said, “I don’t do nuance.”

Walter Brueggemann uses Slouka’s article to speak about Sabbath—Sabbath as idleness, idleness without purpose, except to think and reflect and develop that inner freedom so necessary for any human being who wishes to be truly human.³

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. (Ps 23:1–2)

God, after all, will provide. God will set the table before us. Our cups will overflow. Perhaps that is exactly what the early Christians believed when they sold all they had and took the proceeds and gave to each, according to his or her need. Perhaps that is exactly what the writer of John’s Gospel believed as he described Jesus as the open gate through which we can come and go, finding protection from the thieves and bandits (perhaps work is such a thief?) and then finding nourishment in green pastures.

Work has its place, certainly, especially work that contributes to the common good, but so does idleness. So does Sabbath rest. My goodness, in

² Mark Slouka, “Quitting the Paint Factory,” *Harpers Magazine* (November 2004) 61.

³ See Walter Brueggemann, “You Cannot Fool Your *Nephesh*,” Chapter Eight in *Mandate to Difference* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) 141–158.

light of our society's anxious passion for work, Psalm 23 sounds almost counter-cultural!

The opening poem of Wendell Berry's book of poetry, *Sabbaths*, reads:

*I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.*

*Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.*

*After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing
the day turns, the trees move.⁴*

I love that T-shirt that pictures an empty chair, and the caption reads: "Don't just do something—sit there." So let us, my friends, sing a song in praise of idleness, in praise of Sabbath rest, in praise of the God who provides and will provide, as long as we can just begin to allow ourselves to be still and know that God is. And the good news is that we do not have to wait for retirement in order to do just this. My friends, it is a blessed thing to do nothing, whether we are young or old, working or retired. May God grant us the grace so to do . . . nothing. Amen.

⁴ Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987) 5–6